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POETRY: *A Magazine of Verse*

ARABEL

Twists of smoke rise from the limpness of jeweled fingers;
The softness of Persian rugs hushes the room.
Under a dragon lamp with a shade the color of coral
Sit the readers of poems one by one.
And all the room is in shadow except for the blur
Of mahogany surface, and tapers against the wall.

And a youth reads a poem of love—forever and ever
Is his soul the soul of the loved one; a woman sings
Of the nine months which go to the birth of a soul.
And after a time under the lamp a man
Begins to read a letter, having no poem to read.
And the words of the letter flash and die like a fuse
Dampened by rain—it's a dying mind that writes
What Byron did for the Greeks against the Turks.
And a sickness enters our hearts: the jeweled hands
Clutch at the arms of the chairs; about the room
One hears the parting of lips, and a nervous shifting
Of feet and arms.

And I look up and over
The reader's shoulder and see the name of the writer.
What is it I see?—the name of a man I knew!
You are an ironical trickster, Time, to bring,
After so many years and into a place like this,
This face before me: hair slicked down and parted
In the middle, and cheeks stuck out with fatness,

Arabel

Plump from Camembert and Clicquot, eyelids
Thin as skins of onions, cut like dough 'round the eyes.
Such was your look in a photograph I saw
In a silver frame on a woman's dresser—and such
Your look in life, you thing of flesh alone!

And then,

As a soul looks down on the body it leaves—
A body by fever slain—I look on myself
As I was a decade ago, while the letter is read:

I enter a box

Of a theatre with Jim, my friend of fifty,
I being twenty-two. Two women are in the box,
One of an age for Jim and one of an age for me.
And mine is dressed in a dainty gown of dimity,
And she fans herself with a fan of silver spangles,
Till a subtle odor of delicate powder or of herself
Enters my blood, and I stare at her snowy neck,
And the glossy brownness of her hair until
She feels my stare and turns half-view, and I see
How like a Greek's is her nose, with just a little
Aquiline touch; and I catch the flash of an eye,
And the glint of a smile on the richness of her lips.

The company now discourses upon the letter
But my dream goes on:

I re-live a rapture

Which may be madness, and no man understands
Until he feels it no more. The youth that was I

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From the theatre under the city's lights follows the girl,
Desperate lest in the city's curious chances
He never sees her again. And boldly he speaks.
And she and the older woman, her sister,
Smile and speak in turn; and Jim, who stands
While I break the ice, comes up—and so
Arm in arm we go to the restaurant,
I in heaven walking with Arabel,
And Jim with her older sister.
We drive them home under a summer moon,
And while I explain to Arabel my boldness,
And crave her pardon for it, Jim, the devil,
Laughs apart with her sister while I wonder
What Jim, the devil, is laughing at. No matter—
To-morrow I walk in the park with Arabel.

Just now the reader of the letter
Tells of the writer's swift descent
From wealth to want.

We are in the park next afternoon by the water.
I look at her white throat—full, as it were, of song;
And her rounded virginal bosom—beautiful!
And I study her eyes, I search to the depths her eyes
In the light of the sun. They are full of little rays,
Like the edge of a *fleur-de-lys*, and she smiles
At first when I fling my soul at her feet.

But when I repeat I love her, love her only,
A cloud of wonder passes over her face—
She veils her eyes. The color comes to her cheeks.
And when she picks some clover blossoms and tears them
Her hand is trembling. And when I tell her again
I love her, love her only, she blots her eyes
With a handkerchief to hide a tear that starts.
And she says to me: "You do not know me at all—
How can you love me? You never saw me before
Last night." "Well, tell me about yourself."
And after a time she tells me the story:
About her father who ran away from her mother;
And how she hated her father, and how she grieved
When her mother died; and how a good grandmother
Helped her and helps her now; and how her sister
Divorced her husband. And then she paused a moment:
"I am not strong, you'd have to guard me gently,
And that takes money, dear, as well as love.
Two years ago I was very ill, and since then
I am not strong."

"Well, I can work," I said.
"And what would you think of a little cottage,
Not too far out, with a yard and hosts of roses,
And a vine on the porch, and a little garden,
And a dining-room where the sun comes in
When a morning breeze blows over your brow;
And you sit across the table and serve me,

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And neither of us can speak for happiness
Without our voices breaking, or lips trembling?"

She is looking down with little frowns on her brow:
"But if ever I had to work, I could not do it—
I am not really strong."

"But I can work," I said.
I rise and lift her up, holding her hand.
She slips her arm through mine and presses it.
"What a good man you are!" she said, "just like a brother!
I almost love you; I believe I love you."

The reader of the letter, being a doctor,
Is talking learnedly of the writer's case,
Which has the classical marks of paresis.

Next day I look up Jim and rhapsodize
About a cottage with roses and a garden,
And a dining-room where the sun comes in,
And Arabel across the table. Jim is smoking
And flicking the ashes, but never says a word
Till I have finished. Then in a quiet voice:
"Arabel's sister says that Arabel's straight,
But she isn't, my boy—she's just like Arabel's sister.
She knew you had the madness for Arabel—
That's why we laughed and stood apart as we talked.
And I'll tell you now I didn't go home that night;
I shook you at the corner and went back

Arabel

And stayed that night. Now be a man, my boy;
Go have your fling with Arabel, but drop
The cottage and the roses."

They are still discussing the madman's letter.

And memory permeates me like a subtle drug:
The memory of my love for Arabel—
The torture, the doubt, the fear, the restless longing,
The sleepless nights, the pity for all her sorrows,
The speculation about her and her sister,
And what her illness was;
And whether the man I saw one time was leaving
Her door or the next door to it, and if *her* door
Whether he saw my Arabel or her sister. . . .

The reader of the letter is telling how the writer
Left his wife chasing the lure of women.

And it all comes back to me as clear as a vision:
The night I sat with Arabel strong but conquered.
Whatever I did, I loved her, whatever she was.
Madness or love, the terrible struggle must end.
She took my hand and said, "You must see my room."
We stood in the door-way together, and on her dresser
Was a silver frame with the photograph of a man.
I had seen him in life: hair slicked down and parted
In the middle, and cheeks stuck out with fatness,

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Plump from Camembert and Clicquot, eye-lids
Thin as skins of onions, cut like dough 'round the eyes.
"There is his picture," she said; "ask me whatever you will.
Take me as mistress or wife—it is yours to decide.
But take me as mistress and grow like the picture before you;
Take me as wife and be the good man you can be.
Choose me as mistress—how can I do less for you, dearest?
Or make me your wife—fate makes me your mistress or
wife."
"I can leave you," I said. "You can leave me," she echoed;
"But how about hate in your heart?"
"You are right," I replied.

The company is now discussing the subject of love—
They seem to know little about it.

But my wife, who is sitting beside me, exclaims:
"Well, what is this jangle of madness and weakness?
What has it to do with poetry, tell me?"

"Well, it's life, Arabel. . . .
There's the story of Hamlet, for instance," I added;
Then fell into silence.

Edgar Lee Masters